



WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JOSE HAMZA SALDANA
IN SUPPORT OF THE
UNEMPLOYMENT BRIDGE PROGRAM

My name is Jose Saldana. I am the Director of the Release Aging People in Prison Campaign (RAPP), based in New York City, with seven regional chapters across the State of New York.

RAPP is an intergenerational, grassroots community organizing and advocacy organization created and led by formerly incarcerated people and family members of people in prison. We work to end mass incarceration and promote racial justice through the release of aging people in prison and those serving long prison sentences. I submit this written testimony today as a member of the Fund Excluded Workers Coalition, for which RAPP is on the Steering Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before the 2024 Workforce Development Hearing.

I am testifying today in support of the **Unemployment Bridge Program (S3192-Senator Ramos/A4822-Assemblymember Reyes)** for the 2024-2025 New York State Budget, which would provide unemployment coverage to 750,000 workers excluded from traditional unemployment insurance, with 30,000 people expected to get benefits at any given time. This includes low-income New Yorkers - freelancers, self-employed workers, undocumented workers, people released from prison or immigration detention, and those in the cash economy. The program cost is estimated

to be \$500 million, of which \$75 million will go towards the Department of Labor for administrative purposes and labor.

Excluded workers will always face a crisis, because they are systematically excluded from our unemployment insurance system and other social safety nets. This program must be included in this year's budget. Here's one of the reasons why, directly related to formerly incarcerated people returning to the community: Every year thousands of men and women and non-binary people are released from state prisons or immigration detention jails. Even just a few months in a detention jail can upend a person's life, losing employment that results in a personal crisis. For those being released after years to decades of incarceration, most have very little or no support. When I was released from Green Haven Correctional Facility in 2018, after 38 years of incarceration, six other men were released the same day. I was picked up by my family, while they were being driven in a state prison van to the local bus station with \$40 and a bus ticket on their way to a shelter, to begin a new life.

People in prison have labored for decades in prison industries manufacturing all the furniture, including desks, chairs, and book racks in our state office buildings, and every New York State license plate distributed, as well as all the metal sign posts on our streets and highways. This prison labor contributes millions of dollars to the New York State economy. However, after people are released, their labor does not qualify them for unemployment benefits. At the most vulnerable phase of the reintegration process, usually the first six months, there are little to no resources for them. This is a prescription for failure which places an unbearable burden on families, the vast majority of whom are already financially unstable.

The Unemployment Bridge Program is a humanitarian solution that will benefit thousands of formerly incarcerated people and tens of thousands of Black, Brown and poor families, who had lived in perpetual poverty during the years to decades that their family member(s) were incarcerated. Studies have reported that once formerly incarcerated people are provided with a safety-net to pursue marketable skills, in a

couple of years they uplift their families from perpetual poverty, and are able to engage in community services, like volunteering to mentor at-risk-youth: promoting community safety.

The unemployment Bridge Program is integral to public safety and community prosperity and corrects some of the long lasting impacts of the racist policies of mass incarceration.

We respectfully urge the state legislature to invest in this critical social safety net that equally values all workers in New York State.

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Respectfully Submitted,

Jose Saldana

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